

ACCESS TO DENTAL CARE IN GEORGIA

Oral health is a critical part of children's overall well-being, yet many children in Georgia face challenges accessing consistent, affordable dental care—challenges that make poor oral health one of the leading causes of school absenteeism.¹



20% of children in Georgia did not have a dental check-up in the last 12 months.²

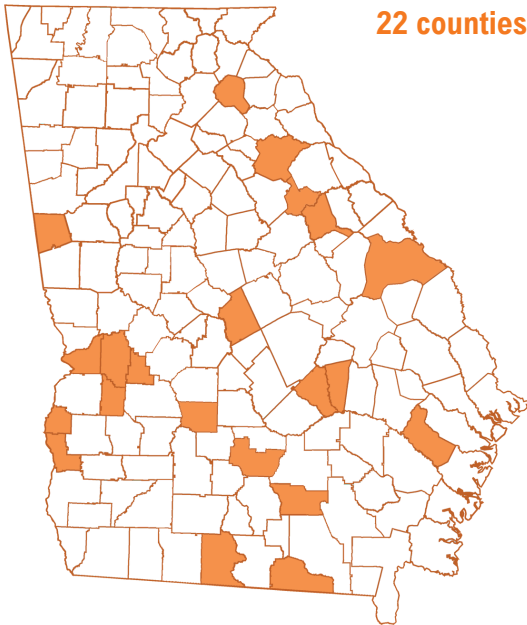
That's more than **481,000** children.

Who is at risk of poor oral health?

- Untreated tooth decay is **50% more common** in children in families with low-incomes compared to children in families with higher incomes.³
- Hispanic children have a **higher prevalence** of tooth decay (64%) of tooth decay compared to non-Hispanic children (50%).⁴
- Children in rural communities have a **higher prevalence** of tooth decay (60%) compared to children in urban communities (48%).⁵

Challenges Facing Children and Dentists

Availability of Care



22 counties in Georgia have no dentists.⁶

Dentists: 1 per 2,053 Georgians⁷

Hygienists: 1 per 2,227 Georgians⁸

Georgia has **190** dental care shortage areas.⁹

Federal regulations stipulated that in order to be considered as having a shortage of providers, a designation must have a population-to-provider ratio that meets or exceeds 5,000 to 1 or 4,000 to 1 for areas with unusually high needs.



Challenges for Those Using Public Insurance (Medicaid and PeachCare for Kids®)

- On average, beneficiaries traveled **20 more miles** for dental care compared to those with private insurance.^{[10](#)}
- Only **25%** of Georgia dentists accepted public insurance in 2020.^{[11](#)}
- Children enrolled in fee-for-service Medicaid* were **33% less likely** to receive dental care than those covered by managed care plans.^{[12](#)}
- Medicaid reimburses only **39.8%** of the fees dentists charge, while private insurance typically covers around **80%**.^{[13](#)}

Language Barriers Impeding Access to Dental Care

- Medicaid patients are required by federal law to have access to translation services arranged and paid for by the provider.^{[14](#), [15](#), [16](#)}
- **38%** of dental schools in the United States report that students were not adequately prepared to manage limited English-proficient patients.^{[17](#)}

Benefits of Improved Dental Health



Health

- Improved eating and speaking ^{[18](#)}
- Improved diabetes outcomes ^{[19](#)}
- Reduced dental pain ^{[20](#)}
- Improved pregnancy outcomes, including fewer babies with low birthweights ^{[21](#)}



Cost Savings for Kids, Families, and the State

- Reduction of future dental visits and related costs^{[22](#)}
- Reduction in emergency department visits for non-traumatic dental problems^{[23](#)}



Education and Life Outcomes^{[24](#), [25](#)}

- Improved school attendance
- Improved academic performance
- Improved self-esteem and employability
- Reduced pain and suffering

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The Importance of Fluoride

Fluoride is a naturally occurring mineral that is proven to protect teeth from decay. Fluoride helps rebuilding tooth enamel and strengthen the tooth's surface.²⁶

Benefits of Fluoride²⁷

Untreated tooth decay can cause **pain, school absences, difficulty concentrating, and poor appearance.**²⁸ Utilizing fluoride can lead to:



Fewer cavities



Less severe cavities



Less need for fillings
and tooth extraction



Less pain and suffering
due to tooth decay

Tooth decay and its complications are preventable and early treatment options such as community water fluoridation are safe, effective, and economical.²⁹

Multiple studies have consistently found **no scientific evidence** linking community water fluoridation with any potential adverse health outcomes.³⁰

Fluoridation **does not** cause:³¹

- An increased risk for cancer
- Down syndrome
- Heart disease
- Osteoporosis and bone fracture
- Immune disorders
- Low intelligence
- Renal disorders
- Alzheimer's disease
- Allergic reactions

Water fluoridation is safe, healthy, and effective.^{32, 33}

Community Water Fluoridation

According to the Georgia Dental Hygienists Association, community water fluoridation is “the controlled addition of a fluoride compound to a public water supply to achieve a concentration optimal for dental caries prevention.”³⁴ Research supports that water fluoridation prevents tooth decay by providing frequent and consistent contact with low levels fluoride.³⁵



In 2018, due to the decline in tooth decay, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) named Community Water Fluoridation as one of the 10 greatest public health achievements of the 20th century as identified in the public statement, “The Evidence Supporting the Safety and Effectiveness of Community Water Fluoridation.”³⁶

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Teledentistry

Teledentistry utilizes communications technology to deliver oral care, consultations, and education, as well as the remote provision of dental treatment (screening, diagnosis, consultation, and treatment planning).³⁷



Benefits of Teledentistry from the American Dental Association (ADA)

The ADA recognizes teledentistry as an effective way to:

- Extend the reach of dental professionals
- Expand the reach of a dental home
- Increase access to care by reducing distance barriers

Teledentistry allows for a shorter period to obtain specialty consultations and improves workflow efficiencies for patients, providers, and support staff.

Teledentistry has gained popularity in recent years. According to a 2023 report published in The Journal of American Dental Association:³⁸



30% of dentists use teledentistry in their practices



63% of teledentistry patients are within **20 miles** of their dentist

Benefits Experienced by Dentists Using Teledentistry³⁹

- **63%** reduced in-person patient visits
- **57%** increased access and quality care
- **38%** reduced patient anxiety
- **31%** lower costs for patients
- **31%** patients more receptive to care
- **28%** better care for marginalized communities

Current Policies Affecting Teledentistry in Georgia



- The Georgia Department of Public Health (DPH) established a telemedicine network, available in all 159 counties, which is recognized as a “best practices model of care” to bring specialized care to the underserved and rural areas of Georgia.
- Georgia allows dentists to provide general supervision of dental hygienists in safety net settings such as Title I schools, preschools, and other settings, which increases access to dental care for Georgia’s underserved residents.

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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Increase access in shortage areas

- Leverage the telemedicine network to increase utilization of teledentistry.
- Educate and raise awareness about the ability of dental hygienists to practice in settings such as schools and nursing homes.
- Encourage local public health clinics to provide dental services.

Increase access to dentists

- Continue to increase Medicaid reimbursement rates for dental services like exams, cleanings, fluoride, sealants, and treatments of caries (cavities), inclusive of services delivered via teledentistry.
- Reduce administrative barriers that hinder dentists from accepting Medicaid.
- Establish goals to increase dental access for Fee-for-Service member children (e.g., a minimum percent of children receiving services annually).
- Monitor the number of dental providers that are accepting new patients and actively participate in Medicaid Fee-for-Services and CMO dental networks.

Increase access to dental services in schools

- Leverage comprehensive school-based health services as a venue for providing dental care.

Maintain community water fluoridation supplies

- Continue to fluoridate water in accordance with the standards established by the appropriate authority to help prevent tooth decay and promote oral health.





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